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ABSTRACT

President Bill Clinton offers his observations on the economic condition of the country and why it is important for the nation to now direct its attention to the condition of its schools and school construction. The President also emphasizes the need to use budgetary surpluses to bolster Social Security and Medicare, and paying down the debt to help the economy in the future. He argues that the growth of school enrollment in the near future and the need to implement technology in every classroom are important invests that need to be made now in the form of new school construction, the hiring of 100,000 teachers, and the retrofitting of classrooms for technology. (GR)

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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary
(Des Moines, Iowa)

For Immediate Release July 16, 1999

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
ON INVESTING IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS

Amos Hiatt Middle School
Des Moines, Iowa

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2:25 P.M. CDT

THE PRESIDENT: You know, when Tom Harkin said that anybody with any sense would take their coat off -- (laughter) -- I didn't know whether that meant I didn't have any sense or he just gets hot under the collar quicker than I do. (Laughter and applause.) Actually, I think the answer is a lighter suit.

I am delighted to be here and I thank you all for your wonderful welcome. And I don't mind that it's a warm one. I always love coming to Iowa, coming back here to this wonderful city. I want to thank Ruthann Gaines for her dedication and her remarkable remarks this morning. I want to say that as long as young people like Catherine Swoboda are Exhibit A for Iowa education, this country is going to do just fine. I thought she was terrific. (Applause.)

I thank Secretary Riley for coming with me. Many of you in Iowa may not know it, but Dick Riley and I began our careers as governors together 20 years ago this year, and we've been working at education for a long, long time. I think that history will record that he is the finest Secretary of Education this country has ever had. And I'm very grateful to him and I thank him. (Applause.)

I would like to thank Superintendent Witherspoon and your principal, Gary Eyerly, for welcoming us to this school. And I want to thank all the public officials who are here. I know in addition to the governor we have Lt. Governor Pederson, Attorney General Miller, Secretary of State Culver and State Treasurer Fitzgerald. They're all over there. I thank them for joining me today. And Senate Minority Leader Michael Gronstal, thank you all for being here.

I'd like to say a special word of appreciation to my good friend, Congressman Leonard Boswell, who is also a stout supporter of education. And I think it is appropriate that he's here because he's here with his wife, Dodie, and I'd like for her to stand, because yesterday she retired as a teacher after 31 years. Thank you very much, bless you. Thank you. (Applause.)

And I want to acknowledge that Ruth Harkin is here with Tom today, and to tell you that for most of my administration she was a very valuable member of the Clinton-Gore team and played a major role in our economic programs. And I want to thank her.

And finally, let me say that, as you can see, every time he talks, there is no one in the United States Senate who is more passionate about what he believes than Tom Harkin. And he believes in the education of our children. It's easy to understand why, from his own experience.

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Most of you probably know that his father was a coal miner who didn't finish the 8th grade; his mother was an immigrant with little formal education. Thanks to an ROTC scholarship, he put himself through college. Now he sits next to a Rockefeller in the United States Senate. (Laughter.) It's America and Tom Harkin is the best of America. (Applause.)

You know, I must say, Jay Rockefeller always hates it when we do that to him. (Laughter.) He is also a very good man. And you heard Tom Harkin say that because of his efforts, Iowa will receive another $10 million this year to help renovate schools. But I want to do that for all our schools that need it.

I want to thank some people who are involved in this issue who are not here today: Congressman Charles Rangel, the House sponsor of our school bill; the many members of the AFT, the NEA, the Council of Great City Schools; the building and construction trades who have fanned out to Philadelphia, New York, New Orleans, Buffalo, Houston, Chicago and Miami today to roll up their sleeves and help communities begin to repair their neediest schools.

You know, it is ironic that we're here talking about this school issue, because we are in America in the last year of the 20th century, in this millennium, enjoying the longest peacetime economic expansion in our history: nearly 19 million new jobs in the last six and a half years, the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years, the lowest crime rate in 26 years, the lowest welfare rolls in 30 years, the lowest minority unemployment ever recorded, the highest home ownership in history.

Here in Iowa, unemployment is a whopping 2.6 percent. Home ownership is almost at 75 percent. Wages are rising nationwide for the first time in 20 years for all classes of workers, and even faster here. I feel good about that. I feel good about the fact that compared to six and a half years ago the air and water are cleaner, the food is safer and 90 percent of our children are immunized against serious childhood diseases for the first time in the entire history of our country.

I feel good about the 100,000 young people who have signed up to serve their communities in AmeriCorps and earn money to go to college. (Applause.) I am grateful, with the help of people like Tom Harkin and Leonard Boswell, that this administration has been able to preserve or set aside more land for the American people and our children's future, from the California Redwoods to the Mojave Desert to the Florida Everglades in any administration in history, except those of Franklin and Theodore Roosevelt. I am grateful for all of that.

But what I came here to ask you is, what are we going to do with our prosperity and what are we going to do with our surplus. This is a time of confidence and pride. But, as many people have said, the time to fix the roof is when the sun is shining. And that is literally true in the case of school construction.

Are we going to develop some sort of collective amnesia and pretend that these times have always been here, always will be here, and we can do whatever we want to do that feels best in the moment, or seems most politically popular? Or are we going to think about the children here, and the 21st century, and what America will be like 10 years from now, 20 years from now, 30 years from now when they will have children in these schools?

That is what I want to say. You know, you folks should be glad to see me in Iowa -- I'm the only guy that's been here in weeks that's not running for anything. (Laughter and applause.) What I am doing is trying to think about everything we can possibly do in these last days of this century. The Clinton-Gore administration is not running out the

clock, hoping the good times will last. We are trying to push the ball down the field. We are trying to think about what it takes to build that bridge to tomorrow that all our children can walk across. What it would take to give opportunity to all of our people; to build a community of all of our people; to maintain our nation's leadership for peace and freedom and prosperity around the world; to look at the long-term challenges.

I'll just mention three today -- to get to the school construction issue. But you have -- to understand where the school construction issue is, you have to see it as a part of the big debate going on in Washington: What are we going to do with our prosperity? How should we handle this surplus, the one we have today and the one we're projected to have tomorrow? Otherwise, you couldn't begin to figure out why in the world we just don't do this. I mean, you must all be sitting out there thinking this is a no-brainer, just from what everybody else has already said before I got up here.

I believe that when you look at where we were just six and a half years ago, we had quadrupled the national debt in 12 years. The deficit was $280 billion. It was projected to go to $380 billion this year. Now we have the biggest surplus we've ever recorded, and we're projected to be able to maintain those surpluses into the future, indefinitely.

Now, every farmer here knows that nobody can predict the future. That does not mean that every year we'll have exactly what is predicted. What it means is, if we have predictable economic performances, which is every so often we'll have a downturn, and then we'll have an upturn, then we'll have a downturn, then we'll have an upturn, on average we will produce the surpluses we project to produce over the next 15 years. That's what it means. These projections are not based on everything will be hunky-dory every day of the next 15 years. So they're not unrealistic.

But we have to decide -- since we haven't been in it -- did you ever think when I was here running in '92 we would be back here having a debate about what to do with the surplus? (Laughter.) This is a high-class problem. But it's just as important to get the answer to a high-class problem right as it is to one that you wish you didn't have to deal with. It's not like going to the dentist. But if we don't handle it right, we'll be going to the dentist and nobody will give us a shot to deaden the pain. We have got to deal with this issue in the proper way.

Let me just mention three things. We have to deal with the aging of America. Iowa has got a high percentage of people over 65. The number of people over 65 will double in 30 years. The older we get the more people that will be drawing Social Security and Medicare and the fewer people will be paying into it. This is not rocket science; this is basic math.

I believe before we pass a big tax cut we should save Social Security and Medicare and add a prescription drug benefit to Medicare for the 21st century so that -- (applause.) Why? That's going to save everybody a lot more money in the long run than a tax cut. What's going to happen? What's going to happen if we don't? This is not just about the elderly. I'm not just looking out for the baby boomers that are going to retire in a few years. You know what will happen.

How many family stories do you know right now where parents with little children are also taking care of their parents, because it's the right thing to do. But we have Social Security and Medicare so that we can balance the responsibilities of the generations, and so that families can take of their own needs and look to their children as they go along. So this is not just about the elderly. This is about the

children and grandchildren of the baby boom generation.

The second thing we ought to do is take care of the economy. And I would like to mention just two things, one of which you know very well. One is, there is still a lot of places in this country that aren't participating in the economic recovery. The big problem on the farm is we've had four years in a row of world-wide record harvest for the first time in history, and an economic collapse in 1997 in Asia, so markets shrink, the products go, prices collapse.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Freedom to Farm --

THE PRESIDENT: Exactly right. As Senator Harkin and I warned -- Congressman Boswell and I, we were all three laughing about it -- we said, you know, the people who put in that Freedom to Farm Act acted like there never would be a bad year on the farm. And now last year we dealt with it. Today I'm going to meet with some of your farmers and we're working on it. The Vice President called me after he had a chance to meet with some farmers here this week, and we talked about it.

But the point I want to make is, you have farmers, you have people in Appalachia, you have people in the Mississippi Delta, you have people who live on the Indian reservations, you have people who live in the inner cities, and even though we're doing better than we've ever done, there's still a lot people who aren't part of this train. And there are ways to give everybody a chance who's willing to work to be a part of it. That ought to be something we do with our prosperity. We ought to give everybody who's willing to work a chance to be a part of that prosperity. And I think it's very important. (Applause.)

One thing we can do that will help the economy more than anything else is, if we adopt the plan I put out to save the majority of the surplus for Social Security and Medicare, since it's not needed now -- while we save it we can pay the debt down so much that by 2015, in 16 years, for the first time since 1835, this country can be out of debt. (Applause.)

If you're a middle class person, why should you worry about that? Because if we're out of debt it means lower interest rates, higher investment, more jobs, higher wages, lower college loan, credit card, car payment and home mortgage rates. It means a more stable world economy over the long run. It means a better environment for farmers and manufacturers and everybody else. It is a good thing to do.

Now, what I want to tell you is, we can do all that and still have a tax cut and still invest in education. But we cannot pretend that there are no consequences to proposing a tax cut that will cut education and prevent us from saving Social Security and Medicare and mean we can't pay off the debt and we can't do these other things. There are choices to be made and we should be thinking about the children and the future. And as we have proved the last six and a half years, when you do things that are right for the long run, often they turn out to be right for the short run, as well.

And so I say to you, this school issue is a part of this debate, this school construction issue. We propose a tax cut to help people save for retirement, take care of long-term care needs of their family, take care of their child care needs; and also to induce people to invest in more school construction with a big tax break. It is very, very important.

And you've already heard about Iowa's needs. You've heard Secretary Riley talk about America's needs. In spite of all -- what you have to understand is, the school enrollments, as big as they are, are fixing to explode. And we've got to do some things about it. We've got to do what Governor Vilsack wants to do everywhere in America. Hardly anybody

has done as well as he has. We've got to hook up all the classrooms in the country to the Internet. And we've got to have teachers to go into the classrooms -- 2.1 million are going to retire over the next few years. Dodie is the beginning of a wave in America. And we've got to find young people to go in there and take their places. And we've got to have good facilities for people to visit -- to learn in.

You know, I can still remember every schoolroom that I ever was in in my life. And a lot of old schools can be modernized, but when you've got kids -- I've been to school districts, literally, literally, with one elementary school with 12 house trailers out behind it. Not one or two -- 12.

So we have to deal with this. And there are serious consequences to not dealing with it. Now, if our school construction initiative passes as a part of our tax cut proposal in our education program, it will help communities have $25 billion over the next two years for school construction. That's enough to build or modernize 6,000 schools.

Now, if you compare that to the Republican proposal you will see that their plan is 644 schools. Ours is nearly 10 to 1. So somebody can say, well, we have a school construction proposal -- 6,000 is better than 644. (Applause.)

We're having the same discussion about teachers. Last year I was thrilled -- in the teeth of an election year, we had a bipartisan agreement to put 100,000 teachers in our schools, because the classes are getting bigger and it would allow us to lower class size in the early grades to an average of 18. We just had another national study come out the other day about how important that can be, and how the learning gains can be permanent. And just two weeks ago, Secretary Riley and I announced $1.2 billion to help states and local school districts hire the first 30,000 of those 100,000.

But now the majority in Congress wants to back off from that. They have other ways to spend the money. They want to give the money out and not guarantee that it will go to hire new teachers. I feel that if you make a promise in an election year, you ought to keep it the next year, too. If it was a good idea last year, it's still a good idea.

So I say to you, these are two things that we ought to do. We need to do this school construction program. We need to finish the work of hiring 100,000 teachers. We need to finish the work that Governor Vilsack has done so much on here of wiring all of our schools. We need to finish these things. It all comes down to this: What do you want to do with this moment of prosperity?

And let me say one thing -- you know, Washington tends to be a more partisan place than most places in America -- maybe more than anyplace in America. I've done what I could to try to unify this country. Most Americans, whether they're Republicans or Democrats or Independents that have kids in the schools want them to go to good schools.

I'll be you there are a lot of school elections in Iowa where Republicans and Democrats vote the same way for school bond issues or on educational proposals. This is not always an ideological issue. This should be an issue that brings America together. But issues that unify people in the country have a way of dividing people in Washington. We had the same thing happen with the patients bill of rights; you probably saw that.

We had this crazy idea, we Democrats did, that everybody in a managed care plan in America ought to be able to see a specialist if their doctor said they should see one. Or, if they lived in a big city and they got hurt in an accident, they ought to be able to go to the nearest

emergency room, not be driven halfway across town. Or, if their employer changed managed care providers while a woman employee was in the middle of a pregnancy or a man or a woman was in chemotherapy, they ought to be able to keep their doctor until their treatment was over.

And if somebody hurts you with a bad decision, you ought to be able to get redress for it. Now those are rights that I enjoy under the Federal Health Care Plan, and that Congress enjoys and every federal employee enjoys. And the Congress -- the Republican Majority's own budget office said this would add at most $2 a month to a managed care premium. In the federal system, it added less than $1 a month when I put them in.

Now, I don't know, but I believe in Iowa when you go to the doctors office, they don't ask you if you're a Republican or a Democrat. (Laughter.) And I don't believe when the children come to school here they ask you if you're a Republican or a Democrat. These are things that should unify us. And so I ask you to please, please do what you can to talk to all the members of this congressional delegation, ask them to support us on 100,000 teachers, ask them -- it's still not too late to pass the patients' bill of rights that gives the rest of you the protections we have in Congress and the White House and the federal government. And ask them to make a part of any tax cut plan a school construction initiative that will build or modernize 6,000 schools.

You think about this young woman who introduced me today. You think about this young woman who introduced me today. I have seen people like her all across America, marvelous kids in the poorest corners of this country -- kids in schools that are 75 years old that haven't been fixed, where the kids walk up the steps and they see broken windows every day. Where there are rooms, in some cases whole floors they can't even go on. They deserve better.

How in the world can we say to them, we had the most prosperous time in American history, we had the biggest surplus in history, we dug ourselves out of debt, but all we thought of was ourselves and the next election -- we didn't have the time or money or vision to think about you and your future. We are a better country than that. All of us are, without regard to party. Everywhere else but Washington, D.C. you would never hear anybody discarding this argument. I implore you: Help us to get this done this year. The children of America deserve 21st century schools.

Thank you and God bless you. (Applause.)

END 2:48 P.M. CDT